Repertoires of hierarchy, inequality, and desire: Experiencing Rio de Janeiro upon arrival

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Abstract

How do newcomers to Rio de Janeiro engage with difference and inequality in the urban landscape and the bodies circulating within it? In the 2010s, recently arrived Senegalese and Spaniards unevenly engaged with the affective atmospheres and collective aesthetics which urban spaces and their inhabitants afforded. Combining critical phenomenology and performativity, I conceive of repertoire as the conceptual lens to account for the newcomers' struggles with and specific ways of relating to the countless hierarchies that pervade urban life. More specifically, their sensorial repertoires articulate how newcomers attune to dense urban landscapes mediated by their embodied experience that ranges from privilege and racism to desire and fear. In sensorial repertoires, newcomers continuously modulate the racial, gendered, and classed reifications and prejudice which they situate within transnational and local trajectories. More broadly, repertoires echo and co-constitute the challenging everyday of dense, unequal, and multifaceted urban worlds.

Keywords

critical phenomenology, stereotypes, intersectionality, migration, Brazil

Introduction

In the 2010s, migrant newcomers[1] offered poignant commentaries on Rio de Janeiro, their new place of residence, and its inhabitants, the *Carioca*. The spontaneous accounts of Hamidou Diang and Jordi Moncada were controversial and provocative. Two liberal professionals – from Senegal and Spain, in their fifties and forties – drew on global and local, often prejudiced stereotypes of geography, race, gender, and class to render the city's people and spaces intelligible. At the same time, they were attentive to the histories and spatial configurations shaping experiences of hierarchy, inequality, and desire in the city. In doing so, they tampered with local taboos that control racist and misogynist discourse as well as the collective pride in the city. Consciously or not, newcomers meddled with the city's enduring colonial, racist, and misogynist remnants.

> There is this matter of topography, which is a marvel. If Rio de Janeiro wasn't in this geographical location it would be a piece of shit, because everything that human beings have done in Rio de Janeiro is no longer beautiful. […] But then again, seeing the silhouette of the *Pedra da Gávea*, the *Dois Irmãos*, the *Pedra do Cristo* [three emblematic rock formations], the green, the hills that go this way and that. But the city itself, I know, has many beautiful things too, many old buildings. I used to walk down a street called Frei Caneca, […] a street [in the centre] with beautiful buildings and houses that are – collapsing. (Jordi Moncada, 01/2015)[2]

> We are from a tropical country; Rio de Janeiro is hot, it's forty degrees. It's different from Germany, where people stay normal. Here it's hot, the people dress little, the mixed women there, that *morena*. They are beautiful, big bottoms, breasts. They have to show it. And what is the problem? Now that doesn't mean that they are prostitutes, because that has nothing to do with it. – […] The Carioca woman is the most beautiful in the world and you Europeans know this, because you leave from there to spend your holidays here. You can't censor this, you have to let it live, you have to be happy. (Hamidou Diang, 02/2015)

In these narratives, my two male interlocutors situated their reifying readings within a multifaceted and nuanced account of lived urban experience. To come to grips with the new urban environment upon arrival, heightened aesthetic sensibility was combined with a partial perception of urban atmospheres. Rio de Janeiro, the *cidade maravilhosa*, the 'marvellous city', guaranteed a sensorial roller coaster ride, accompanied by strong emotions, ranging from euphoria and desire to disdain and fear.

To understand the fragile constitution of urban sociality in a city that is hyper-racialized, gendered, and classed, I ask how newcomers made sense of, and related to, their new material surroundings and the people they met in encounters that ranged from violent to

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[1] I address my interlocutors as newcomers for two reasons: firstly, their arrival in Brazil is recent compared to those forced and free migrants who historically co-constituted the contemporary Brazilian population; secondly, in contrast to 'migrant', the term stresses local participation, even if temporary, rather that continuous (onward) mobility.

[2] All names are changed and all quotes are my own translations from Portuguese, French, or Spanish, the languages of the conversations. Specific Portuguese expressions are kept in italics.

seducing ones. Newcomers engaged in partial relations in urban encounters, responding to the cues they obtained from the urban landscape and the people that circulated within it. They attuned to the affective atmospheres of historically situated urban spaces and collective aesthetic sensibilities. Atmospheres are 'ephemeral yet inescapable element of our everyday experiential and conceptual environments' (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019: 1); continuously changing, they are about how places and events feel, how they affect us, as well as about what they mean (Bille and Simonsen, 2021; Gandy, 2017). Aesthetic sensibilities might best be described as a sensorial attunement to the look and feel of urban environments and the projects that aim at creating a (desirable) impression of a place (Degen and Rose, 2024: 1). Better than affective atmosphere or aesthetic sensibilities, sensorial repertoire conceptually captures the dynamic conjuncture of disparate and contradictory sensorial attunement to the performance of urban hierarchies and their consequences.

I address the newcomers' sensorial repertoires of engaging with the city and its inhabitants through a critical phenomenology of encounter (Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020). Instead of emphasising mind-body dualisms, Simonsen and Koefoed show how a critical phenomenology pays attention to 'embodied, situated and often more affective forms of experience' (2020: 9), which are sensitive to socially and politically situated difference that unfolds in encounters. Sensorial repertoires articulate the newcomers' multifaceted experiences with unequally positioned urban dwellers. They encapsulate the mutually affective relation between people and their surroundings. A critical phenomenology embraces this mutual influence between bodies and space and offers embodied experience as a conceptual middle ground that bridges between pre-reflexive ways of being affected and subjective emotions and signification (Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020: 44–45). Simonsen and her co-authors show how affective and expressive ways of relating to the surrounding world come intertwined (Bille and Simonsen, 2021; Simonsen, 2022; Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020). Also in line with Duff's affective right to the city (2017) and others who seek to bridge between phenomenology and performativity (Ahmed, 2006; Stoller, 2010), sensorial repertoires combine an awareness for affect with an attention to the performativity of difference and embodied experience (Butler, 1997, 2015). In Rio de Janeiro, it is the performativity of race, class, and gender that unfolds in encounters in intersectional dynamics (Akotirene, 2018; Butler, 1997; Fassin, 2011; Gonzalez, 2018) and infuses the newcomers' sensorial repertoires and the relations they form. Affective and performative at once, these repertoires not only echo but also co-constitute the challenging everyday of a dense, unequal, and multifaceted urban world.

My ethnography is set among newcomers from Senegal and Spain, who had lived in Rio de Janeiro since the early 2000s. I ask how newcomers relate to a city and its inhabitants in both their everydayness and extremes. In the 2010s, an aesthetic marketization strategy was underway that re-issued the brand of Rio de Janeiro as the 'marvellous city' to properly receive the Olympic Games and the World Cup (Jaguaribe, 2014). It tapped into city's globally recognizable aesthetics, visually tensioned by the imposing statue of Christ, the rock of

Sugarloaf Mountain, and the favelas, climbing up the emblematic hills and sprawling towards the north. This is part of the city's unique materiality in which inequality, fear, and desire come intertwined. Jordi's initial commentary exemplifies how clichéd urban imaginaries were swiftly nuanced yet still caused unease. Spanish newcomers would also invoke the sensations of rhythms and colours during carnival or a samba performance, among the most prominent affective atmospheres of the city. However, daily encounters with violence, crime, and inequality simultaneously ruptured any uniform attempt of aestheticization, introducing discontinuities. Like Hamidou, many of my interlocutors specifically addressed the gendered and raced body of the Carioca, often combining topographical and embodied beauty with the harsh visibility of unequal urban conditions (Silva, 2006; Pravaz, 2014; Roth-Gordon, 2017; Roth-Gordon and Larkins, 2025). These commentaries profoundly depended on how the newcomers themselves were positioned. Newcomers' sensorial repertoires revealed their unique ways of relating to the layered urban landscape they gradually came to inhabit. Repertoires aptly compose a thoroughly nuanced, locally and transnationally situated and embodied knowledge of the racial, gendered, and classed reifications and prejudice constitutive of contemporary urban worlds in Brazil and beyond.

To better grasp the embodied dynamics of encounters with and in the city, I mobilize sensorial repertoire as a conceptual lens encouraged by several considerations. Bourdieu (2007: 2) has described how anthropologists devise 'an explicit and at least semi-formalized substitute for [the practical mastery of a practice] in the form of a repertoire of rules'. Critiquing the often mistaken urge of social scientists to formulate rules, King (2016) rather emphasises how social actors creatively improvise upon abstract principles, such as intersectionality or coloniality. Explicitly interested in social and cultural heterogeneity, sociolinguistics have used repertoire to describe all the 'means of speaking' people 'know how to use and why' to communicate; for them, language repertoires are 'individual, biographically organized complexes of resources [that] follow the rhythms of actual human lives' (Blommaert and Backus, 2013: 11, 15). Adding a phenomenological twist, *sensorial* repertoires articulate how city dwellers are affected by, affect, and creatively relate to, urban spaces and populations in their encounters (Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020). While highly nuanced, newcomers' sensorial repertoires of ''the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment' (Pink, 2009: 25) remain partial and fragmented guides to the overwhelming multiplicity of the city.

To deconstruct my co-participation in the making of repertoires and their links to affective atmospheres and aesthetic sensibilities, I will next introduce my ethnography among newcomers in Rio de Janeiro. I then substantiate the aesthetic project and the critique of the branding efforts of the city and its violent silencing efforts, particularly engaging with visual and spatial markers of difference, the myth of equality at the beach, and individual attempts to pass. I will make explicit those aspects of the city's geographical and social heterogeneity with which many interlocutors spontaneously engaged. In the following section, I will show how embodied experience and the performativity of subject formation profoundly co-

constituted the newcomers' sensorial repertoires. In repertoires, the affects and the performativity of stereotypical portrayals and quick classifications converge with vague feelings and overwhelming sensations in unique ways. The multiple and distinctive repertoires reveal the specific ways in which newcomers come to terms with a new locality in its complexity, connecting their current living environment to previous ones. I conclude on the conceptual potential of thinking with sensorial repertoires to understand the distinctive experiences of differently positioned urban dwellers, newcomers and other residents alike, in everyday urban encounters that express a challenging, unequal, and yet enticing, urban world in Brazil and beyond.

Ethnography among newcomers

Between 2014 and 2020, I accompanied people from Senegal and Spain, who arrived in Rio de Janeiro since the early 2000s, for a total of 30 months split into regular intervals of two to six months. I sought a heterogeneity among Spanish and Senegalese to be able to question any particular genealogy of experiencing difference locally in Brazil and globally by being systematically ascribed a particular category of origin or reduced to a specific migration trajectory (Heil, 2020a). The risks of such reification presented themselves in distinctive ways in Brazil, given the country's socio-historical constitution at the (post)colonial confluence of forced and voluntary migrations from Africa and Europe. To keep the comparison feasible, in this article, I empirically foreground coloniality, race, and class, while I have addressed gender and sexuality elsewhere (Heil, 2021b, 2022).[3]

The destabilize any easily preconceived notions, I chose Senegalese and Spanish interlocutors with vastly different life trajectories: in both groups, there were academics, professionals, expatriates, and entrepreneurs, on the one end of the spectrum, and manual workers, street vendors, and others active in the informal economy, on the other. Given my previous ethnographic research in both Spain and Senegal, I met many of the Senegalese and some of the Spaniards through existing networks; others I met at events. In addition, I recruited interlocutors – more Spaniards than Senegalese – via social media posts. I could build my relation with Senegalese and Spaniards on the shared experience of newcomers in Brazil, despite all our relevant differences regarding origin, race, religion, class, gender, sexual identity, and political opinion. Given the rapport we established over the years, the sometimes substantial tensions caused by our differences turned into fertile grounds of in-depth ethnographic enquiry and the coproduction of relevant insights.

Throughout my fieldwork, I participated in weekly secular and religious events of Senegalese in which repeatedly up to 100 Senegalese participated (Heil, 2021a). With many of them I had informal individual and collective conversations. Among the Spanish, I circulated in the

[3] As evidenced above, I have substantially drawn on theoretical contributions to gender and sexuality, as well as intersectionality, to conceptually frame sensorial repertoires. The actual analysis of sensorial repertoires attentive to gender and sexuality deserves a future article-length analysis.

networks of newcomers in which I recurrently encountered 60-80 newcomers at public and private socializing events; with many of whom I had informal conversations about my research (Heil, 2020b). With all my interlocutors, I spent time on their days off, before and after work, or during lunch breaks. We often met in their homes, mainly in the case of those less well-off, in cafés, bars, restaurants, or simply on a square, in a park, or at the beach. With a significant number of people, I went on long walks through the city or visited cultural venues. Others, I accompanied on their commute to and from work. I also conducted semi-structured interviews in equal numbers with Senegalese and Spaniards in Rio de Janeiro, of which 68 were recorded and transcribed. With about half of those, I also recorded follow-up interviews in the later years of my research. Many other interlocutors, especially Senegalese, preferred to engage with my research without being recorded. This justifies the sparce use of direct quotes in the analysis. Comprehensive participant observation complemented the (recorded) narratives to understand urban life around my interlocutors and their participation in it.

Some of the Senegalese in Rio de Janeiro were highly skilled professionals, a small group were specialized vendors of African crafts, and most were independent street and beach vendors of sunglasses and other 'Made in China' products. They were aged 20 to 50, the highly-skilled and crafts vendors generally among the older ones (Heil, 2021a). Vendors lived predominantly in Copacabana, in Rio de Janeiro's more affluent South Zone, and the centre of the neighbouring city of Niterói; the highly-skilled scattered across Rio's middle-class neighbourhoods. All of them transited much larger parts of the city. Most Senegalese in Rio were men and most of the two dozen resident women had come to join their husbands. Both men and women, but mainly independent vendors of both crafts and China-made products, shared some of their knowledge with me.

The renewed arrival of Spanish women and men in Brazil happened in the context of the general exodus from Southern Europe in the aftermath of the 2008 European economic crisis and the ensuing economic austerity measures (Heil, 2020b). All the Spanish I encountered were white and most of them in their 20s and 30s. Aside from some exceptions, all lived in the South Zone or Centre, in middle-class neighbourhoods as well as gentrifying pacified favelas. Only some openly blamed the crisis for their migration, while most of them simply framed their mobility as an individual life decision. A small group of my interlocutors were well-paid Spanish professionals, some entrepreneurs, others expatriates, most often in the late 30s to early 50s. Only some of them readily used the label of expat to self-identify.

This ethnography zooms in on the earliest impressions of newcomers to a city to understand sensorial repertoires as they unfold. Many interlocutors had arrived at the beginning or just before the start of this research. Those who had come years before, I invited to look back on their past experiences. While the city went through significant economic and social transformations between 2014 and 2020, the multiple crises that followed the megaevents of 2014 (World Cup) and 2016 (Olympic Games) intensified the sensorial experiences and resulted in doubts and reassessments. Yet our exchanges condensed to a continuous stream

of experience in which stereotypical reifications and prejudice as well as affective and aesthetic attunement became contextualised within the newcomers' local and transnational trajectories.

Stereotypical reification and prejudice

In Rio de Janeiro, the geography of racialized wealth and desirability is granular, as the rich and the poor live in great proximity and crossing one street can make the difference regarding the security and desirability of a place. While the tensions caused by the proximity of *asfalto* (asphalt, flat geography, meaning middle and upper-class neighbourhoods) and *morro* (hills, meaning favelas) are materially explicit, just as the macro distinctions into affluent South Zone pitted against North and West, smaller-scale urban dynamics involving local people and places can be less obvious to newcomers or visitors, stimulating attentive perception and ambiguous affects. Machado-Borges (2014: 213) confirms that the 'reading of bodies is a constant everyday practice in Brazil: "Is that person dangerous?" "Should she be avoided?" Poor working-class people are painfully aware of these readings.' In an affective atmosphere shaped by the omnipresent potential of violence, prejudiced interpellations respond to the felt need to box the Other in, in whichever way, to stay safe oneself. Cultural productions such as 'City of God' and the tabloid TV news channels on crime, like 'Cidade Alerta' (Alert city), nourish this collective imaginary and the newcomers' sensorial attunement to it (Oliveira Filho, 2015).

In the 2010s, the rebranding efforts of the 'marvellous city' evoked different aesthetic sensibilities. It tapped into the 'readings of visual culture, architectural emblems, cultural practices and the literary imagination' (Jaguaribe, 2014: 4) that foreground desirable aspects of a global city and actively silence inequality, violence, or precarity. The visual campaign during the megaevents selectively endorsed elements from the colonial and modernist past and omitted remnants of cheap mass tourism in the 1970s, a time when Rio was best known for its unique topography and racialized sex work. While Rio de Janeiro's branding efforts today cannot but include the favela as an emblematic feature of the urban topography, crime, drug trafficking, and precarious housing have remained unaddressed as they would speak to the demise of the state, the persistence of social inequalities, and the lack of a vision for the future (Lino e Silva, 2025; Oosterbaan, 2023; Robb Larkins, 2015). The performative strategies of effacing much of the favelas' reality are mirrored in the state's necropolitics which over-proportionately targets the favelas' black male youth (Alves, 2018; Rocha, 2012). As if to make this double genealogy less violent, in the run-up to the megaevents, urbanist material projects aimed at turning the favelas into 'fully equipped neighborhoods with infra-structure of sewage, electricity, transportation and public spaces' (Jaguaribe, 2014: 32–33). State projects selectively benefited those favelas in the South Zone of the city, with which tourists were likely to come into contact (Torresan, 2025). Street-level critics inscribed these projects into the long-standing logic of *para inglês ver*, for the English to see, i.e. denouncing a 'situation in which one wants to "maintain a façade" in front of the "other"' to hide the discomforting truth

(Fry, 1982: 17). Such superficial renewal could only deceive those uninformed of or insensitive to the actual necropolitical state in the city.

The expectation that the paramount topography of Rio de Janeiro and hegemonic portrayals would facilitate my discussions of urban inequality resonated with most of my European interlocutors. Like in the opening description of Jordi, many Spaniards, most of them living in the South Zone, began their narratives with the eye-catching qualities of the city. They accentuated the contrasts of the exuberant nature and the sprawling built space, of natural beauty and unconcealed violence, of modernist architecture and urban decay. The quick ordering of spaces, bodies, and styles into racialized and classed hierarchies relied on stereotypes and prejudice – sometimes even caricature – as well as their steadfast reproduction and occasional contestation. Stereotypes and prejudice were deeply performative and most clearly transpired in visual descriptions, a manifestation of Western visualism that privileges vision over the other senses and reinforces the dualism of body and mind on the basis of the visual tendency to reify (Fabian, 1983: 106–107; Ingold, 2000). Attending to visualism reveals the power differentials at stake in sensorial perception. The continuous reliance on visual characteristics as part of the Brazilian racist regime is exemplified in the country's commissions of hetero-identification used in processes of affirmative action and the implementation of racial quotas (Da Silva et al., 2020).

Apart from broad descriptions of the city characteristic landscape and thinking of public encounters, Spanish interlocutors quickly commented on Rio de Janeiro's beaches in the privileged South Zone. In group conversations, someone among them would hastily substantiate the difficulty in classifying the people around us with reference to the aesthetic similarity of the widely used minimal beach wear – bikini and *sunga* (tight male swim trunks). Against the backdrop of omnipresent inequality and segregation in the city, such statements inadvertently engaged with the hopeful but long demystified narrative of the beach as a democratic space given that it was public and theoretically accessible to all (Freeman, 2002). Intended or not, the conversation risked resurrecting Brazilian racial democracy and *mestiçagem* (mixing) that postulated equality where there was none. After all, the cordial racial co-existence and mixture in Brazil was and remains hierarchical, discriminatory, and exploitative beyond the abolition of slavery (Gonzalez, 2018; Jardim et al., 2022).

In contrast to interlocutors who wanted to remain hopeful despite of everyday scenes of exacerbated racial inequality, other Spaniards readily explained how all Carioca beaches were deeply segregated and by no means democratic. As sense-making never relies on vision alone (Pink, 2011), someone quickly identified large, loud groups of people with their Styrofoam coolers crowding the beach sections closest to the metro stations as likely residents of the distant and less affluent North Zone or *Baixada Fluminense*, Rio's stigmatized and structurally disadvantaged metropolitan belt. My interlocutors sympathetically presumed that the inhabitants who lived far away brought food and drinks from home for the entire day. It was the only way to make the long trip worthwhile and affordable, given the size of extended families. Pre-empting their presence, the upper echelons of Carioca society, or those of my

interlocutors who aspired to belong to them, tried to steer clear from the respective beach sections. Careful to not openly discriminate, some simply claimed to better like other parts of the beach.

Sitting in the city centre with Salloum, a Senegalese street vendor who arrived in 2014, he inadvertently provided his own critique of racial democracy. Trying to make his point about racialized difference and moral decay, he classified Brazilian women in business attire as white, while women in hot pants and tank top as black. Discussing with Senegalese how to read the Brazilian population, we often struggled over the persistence of a black-white binary and the linked performances of race and prejudice in Brazil (Fassin, 2011). This struggle over and the persistence of the binary itself made sense in a city in which the sometimes hardly perceivable difference between the luxury of a suntan and mixed-race ancestry is firmly maintained (Pravaz, 2014). Senegalese shared a transnationally mediated reading of the local class-race nexus in Brazil that distinctively racialized class, education, and style. Senegalese offered their rendering of an urban colonial archive in which the population is judged in public spaces according to their looks. Regarding domestic employees, for example, Machado-Borges (2014: 213) argues that, '[b]odily practices establish, reflect and maintain social hierarchies: notions of beauty, cleanliness, "good" taste and "right" preferences allow and/or deny access to desirable groups and positions'. These aspirations also reverberate in the omnipresence of plastic surgery to assemble the perfectly desirable body from differentially valued racialized features (Edmonds, 2010; Jarrin, 2015).

My Spanish and Senegalese interlocutors clearly perceived such omnipresent stylization of the body in the attempts to pass in regimes of differentiated desirability. These efforts take place against the backdrop of the Brazilian history of eugenics which aimed at *branqueamento*, whitening (Mitchell, 2016; Müller and Cardoso, 2017; Schwarcz, 1999) and an increasing affirmation of Blackness[4] (Jardim et al., 2022). My interlocutors intuitively engaged with racialised, gendered, and classed stereotypes and prejudice that structured the collective aesthetics of the city and its inhabitants. Often not without sharing their doubts, they offered first takes on hard-to-describe affective atmospheres of neighbourhoods, situations, and encounters. Newcomers inherited hegemonic portrayals through the partial connections they formed with the urban spaces and dwellers, thereby omitting much local complexity. Not unlike the extremely heterogeneous local population and the sedimented ways of acting upon public interpellations, yet in their own distinctive ways, newcomers modulated prejudices and stereotypes at the intersection with their embodied experience. Their continuously evolving, partial yet nuanced sensorial repertoires reflected their local and transnational trajectories that crossed specific local histories and global designs of difference. The felt need to quickly attune to the encountered hierarchies and the stakes involved are maybe themselves remnants of the Brazilian (post)colonial situation of extreme urban inequalities.

[4] I use Blackness with a capital letter at instances of positive identification.

Embodied experience and sensorial repertoires

Being African and Black in Rio de Janeiro was a defining aspect of how Senegalese experienced Brazil. Apart from their individual migration trajectories, they transited distinct areas of the city, depending on their curiosity or reluctance as well as their social and economic activity. Their ways of relating to the aesthetic and social practices with which they were growing familiar were shaped through these transnational and local trajectories. While at work at the beach carrying his mobile display case with sunglasses, Fallou passed a group of tourists when one of them, in French, expressed frustration over Senegalese vendors like him who now also 'polluted' Rio de Janeiro's beaches. Knowing French, Fallou confronted the tourist, challenging his racist remarks and asserting his equal right to the beach. The lingering effects of such racist encounters were palpable in Fallou's body, still shaken with rage as he recounted the incident. Fallou embodied the entrenched effects of exploitative French colonialism in Senegal (Cruise O'Brien, 1972). The specific Senegalese colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011) had a double effect: firstly, independent of explicitly racist encounters, Senegalese vendors generally felt that the French were the worst to interact with in Rio which affected them strongly and every so often triggered emphatic responses. Secondly, the postcolonial relationship with 'the French' and the impact of coloniality locally materialized whenever white people, in particular foreigners, were racist towards my interlocutors at the beach. Coloniality deeply shaped my interlocutors' daily interactions and how they related to the contestations over Blackness and whiteness in Brazil.

Spanish interlocutors, across all walks of life, often cringingly shared that Brazilians perceived Europeans as improper and smelly, seemingly resentful of showering. They also conveyed how, for the most part, their Brazilian colleagues were disconcerted by, and disapproved of, their spatial choices in the city, such as living in gentrifying favelas of the South Zone or the inner-city neighbourhood of Santa Teresa that was indistinctly interspersed with favelas. In conversation, they paraphrased the disapproving questions of Brazilian colleagues: How could someone aspiring to be middle class choose to live in areas considered dangerous and undesirable? Favelas remained unsafe despite gentrification, and the bohemian neighbourhood of Santa Teresa, though known for its enchanting colonial architecture and stunning views, was hard to access, in clear decay, and dangerous – attributes that the charm of the area could not reasonably offset. While my interlocutors described these divergences, their bodies often revealed how they felt torn. Confronted with Brazilians' disdain for their supposed lack of personal hygiene and their choice of residence, they expressed irritation or discomfort. At times, these feelings sparked emotional counteraccusations, in which they scorned their Brazilian critics as classist or pathologically superficial. An arrogant perception of Brazilians emerged that more frequently characterised Portuguese newcomers to Brazil who inhabited an immediate postcolonial relation (Feldman-Bianco, 2001; Rosales and Machado, 2019).

Living in the most affluent parts of the South Zone, the attempt to attune themselves to Brazilians at the top of the wealth pyramid affected many of my Spanish interlocutors

negatively, notwithstanding their hidden wish to be one of them. The admittedly clichéd black nanny in white dress rearing the children of the residents in the South Zone stood out among the many critiqued scenes of an exclusionary urban aesthetics, also involving conspicuous closed condominiums, helicopters, private car pools, or repetitive plastic surgery. Spaniards wholeheartedly deprecated rich Brazilians who in their view clearly lacked education and taste on top of being openly racist (Heil, 2020b). In March 2016, Marta and Ana mutually echoed their indignation: 'It is very common and it surprises us a lot. But going to Miami on a trip and leaving the kids with a nanny for a whole week is super common.' Nagging about a social class, to which their money had been unable to buy full access – one of them had their membership of a top private club rejected for good –, caused frustration that shaped how they related to the social fabric of Rio de Janeiro.

Grounded in the entangled relations of coloniality, the performativity of race, class, and gender in local and transnational relations mediated how both Spaniards and Senegalese conducted themselves upon arrival and how they were affected by the locality (Bille and Simonsen, 2021; Duff, 2017). Challenging Bourdieu's separation of linguistic and social practice, Butler proposes that

> The performative is not merely an act used by a pregiven subject, but is one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations. In this sense the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject formation, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well. (Butler, 1999: 125)

According to Butler, people come to occupy a meaningful social position through repetitive interpellation, yet social performativity also accommodates the reformulations of, and struggles over, subject formation (Butler, 1997, 2015). These contestations can be overtly political or rather subtle. In the case of newcomers, uncertainties, contradictions, and inconsistencies were part of the process. In contrast to situations where stereotypes and prejudices are readily available to someone, new environments often present affective atmospheres and local aesthetics that remain only partially or slowly accessible to newcomers. Repertoires encapsulate such multiplicity in late-modern, polycentric, and multilingual dwelling environments (Blommaert and Backus, 2013: 11). Newcomers navigate sensorial ambiguity, dealing with partial perceptions that may even feel equivocal. The movement between affective and expressive spatiality defines the mutually affective relation between newcomers and their environment (Bille and Simonsen, 2021). Rather than ready-made meaning, they weave together strands of embodied experience in dynamic and tentative repertoires of relating to their new surroundings (Ingold, 2011: 326).

Regarding Blackness in Brazil, Senegalese interlocutors had come a long way. They had chosen Brazil, the nation with the largest Black population outside Africa, yet their everyday experiences bore little resemblance with imaginaries of a substantively Black country. Between 2014 and 2017, many Senegalese street vendors lived in the centre of Rio's neighbouring city Niterói in a dilapidated apartment block that had once housed an irregular

brothel. Numerous sex workers still lived there, meeting clients in the adjacent streets. Despite the heterogeneous racial backgrounds of their neighbours and appreciation of the availability of affordable housing, when speaking to me, the Senegalese attributed blackness to these situations, the people, and their activities. It was the sobering circumstances of their lives – circumstances which put some of them into a precarious position within the Brazilian social matrix (Heil, 2017) and which they had hoped would be better – that shaped their strong sentiments. Nuancing the seemingly spontaneous descriptions of Brazilian women in hotpants as black, Senegalese here experienced Brazilian blackness in spaces, practices, and people who profoundly affected them but from whom they felt compelled to keep a distance. These divisive effects of their repertoires all too easily carry forward the desired effects of continuous colonial logics in Brazil.

To discursively create this distance, Senegalese tampered with the hegemonic language of racism in Brazil, which mirrored global structures that both they and Brazilians were part of. Racism, classism, and sexism intersected and reinforced one another. Hamidou Niang – in his provocation to me that opens the article – had offered an empowering appreciation of Black Brazilian women from Rio de Janeiro. While his provocation remained inscribed in the affective ambivalences of the racialization and sexualization of Brazilian women, he had demanded the recognition and celebration of their beauty and power (Gonzalez, 2018; Silva, 2006). For many of my male Senegalese interlocutors, Brazilian blackness rooted firmly in the female body, but they rendered it deeply ambivalent in yet other ways. They shared narratives about the supposed sexual promiscuity attributed to Brazilian girls, whom they either encountered, and were enticed by, while dating – a topic they rarely admitted to openly – or viewed with a mix of pity and reproach when those girls became pregnant at an early age. On the one hand, the girls' style of dress and residence in favelas created an atmosphere of both unrestrained sexuality and moral decadence for my interlocutors. On the other, they embraced the girls' struggles as a consequence of insufficient family care and protection, for which they emphatically blamed Brazilian heads of household, whom they imagined to be male.

While an ambiguous process of subject formation was unfolding for the Senegalese in Rio de Janeiro, their sentiments, narrations, and analyses participated in the longstanding racial objectivation in Brazil. Performative in itself, such objectivation of blackness here fostered ambiguous results (Fassin, 2011: 426). Senegalese newcomers struggled to create a sense of personal safety through distance. They risked reproducing hegemonic racist tropes prevalent in Brazil and globally (Foner, 2018) – an outlook that sharply contrasted with how they wished to be encountered themselves. Ultimately, the reductive move of Senegalese that maintained a black-white binary came down to muddling through the binary's working and attempts to tempering one's feelings and expressing a distinctive desirable place in it. They had to grapple with the existing power geometry, making sense of a challenging context that remained grounded in colonial and racist logics in which building a good life was far from obvious. Themselves Black – and proudly so – they were concerned with staying out of trouble. At the

moment of the rising affirmation of Blackness in Brazil in the late 2010s, in part related to North-American influences (Jardim et al., 2022), the potential for coalition between African newcomers and Black Brazilians was growing but not without discontent.

These and other specific experiences and sensations articulated my interlocutors' emerging repertoires and mediated their participation in the new environment. The repertoires captured the processes of improvising upon affective atmospheres and local aesthetics which not always transpired in verbal descriptions and which overly simplistic categories only roughly conveyed (Bille and Simonsen, 2021: 297). While the beach and street vendors often perceived those people as black who were the Other to their most affluent customers, they also conveniently devised a typology of white bodies circulating the urban landscape. Grosso modo, 'white Brazilians,' 'Argentinians,' and 'Latin Americans' acted generously and were thus better customers, while European nationals were stingy to varying degrees, and 'the French' only meant trouble. My interlocutors' visceral experiences of global power geographies and coloniality clearly influenced this affective typology, while the actual commercial interactions provided the most meaningful insights. Even though they named different types of experiences, my interlocutors and I often noticed that our shared language lacked the nuance to fully capture the affective layers of those interactions. Senegalese interlocutors continuously navigated and negotiated these entrenched dynamics and their sensorial repertoires at times reproduced and at others contested the overall atmosphere.

Whether or not my interlocutors recognized the risks of reducing their sensibilities and practice to simple descriptions, their accounts revealed the tension between stereotyping and the nuanced, embodied experiences that both affirmed and transcended such schemata. Open to stereotyping and prone to prejudice, my interlocutors' movements through the city were performative acts that expressively co-constituted their embodied experience and Rio's grown urban hierarchies. My interlocutors worked through both their bodies and minds to make sense of their surroundings and evolving relationalities. Blending personal aspirations, aesthetic attunement, commercial exchanges, and the structural effects of coloniality, the newcomers' sensorial repertoires always evolved. Most of the time, my interlocutors steered clear of overtly negative stereotyping, explaining with a smile that their years of selling on Rio's streets had taught them how to suitably relate to the wide range of people encountered. This could include a wealthy customer ready to spend money, someone who treated them well, a petty criminal lurking on the street corner about to steal from a tourist, or indeed their sex-worker neighbours.

Spanish also had difficulty verbalizing the differences among *Carioca* inhabitants and many struggled to pinpoint how specific performative cues and more subtle atmospheres affected them. Statements like 'well, you somehow know' or 'I would not be able to tell you but isn't it clear anyway' made these challenges tangible. They revealed feeling overwhelmed by the social fabric of Rio de Janeiro that was more complex than words could tell, especially when they were out of tune with the aesthetic sensibilities they felt were expected of them. These struggles might be attributed to the numbing effects of, and contestations over, whiteness.

Younger Spaniards, who self-identified as left or left-leaning, were moved by strong imaginaries and desire in their pursuit of living conditions and life-style options that sat awkwardly within the social hierarchies which large parts of the *Carioca* middle classes normalized. Their raw descriptions of long nights out in Lapa, Gamboa, or possibly Madureira in the North Zone, at a *roda de samba* or a *forró* (two music performances and genres), slurring over details and instead interjecting smiles and moves provided testimony of how deeply they were attracted to the people and places. Descriptive fragments of dilapidating *botecos* (bars) or dance venues in ruins, the leanness of bodies, or someone's rhythm and moves added sensorial intensity. Critiquing racist and classist discrimination and admitting their particular attractions and desires, these interlocutors inhabited and twisted Fanon's 'fantasmatic binaries of fear and desire which have governed the representation of the black figure in colonial discourse' (Fanon, 2008; Hall, 1996: 17–18). Selectively embracing the affective atmospheres of Rio de Janeiro's nightlife and their desires for beauty, creativity, and music frequently constituted a field of personal and collective struggle as they defied classist expectations projected onto them. These specific trajectories gave form to seemingly contradictory and clearly dispersed sensorial repertoires grown at the intersection of the newcomers' life choices, the materiality of the city, and in interaction with its countless inhabitants.

Conclusions

In a sprawling megalopolis like Rio de Janeiro with its steep and intersecting hierarchies, the omnipresence of social and racialized inequality and its materialization in the built environment reverberated in affective atmospheres and aesthetic projects that were – in versions and sometimes caricature – readily felt and commented on by newly arrived urban dwellers. This case exemplifies the importance of affects, aesthetics, and the embodied experience of difference to meaningfully address the layered production of urban hierarchies more broadly. Tensioning critical phenomenology and performativity, sensorial repertoires captured the continuous sensorial and affective modulation of racial, gendered, and classed stereotyped reifications of unequally situated urban dwellers, such as migrant newcomers. It ethnographically embraced the entanglement of the performativity and the embodied experience of difference and enables an understanding of the continuous interplay of how urban hierarchies, atmospheres, and aesthetics affect the city's inhabitants and are affected by them.

Newcomers are a part of a much larger and heterogeneous urban population riddled with inequalities. Given the relatively recent arrival in a new place, local and transnational trajectories play into their embodied experience in the city. Sensorial repertoire as a concept is apt to account for such complex contextualisation which destabilizes reifying and easily prejudiced registers, adding nuance where there seemed none. Sensorial repertoires materialised from both the dynamic trajectories of individuals and groups through the uneven urban landscape of people and spaces, and the hegemonic interpellations rooted in

coloniality, racism, gender, and class. Neither dimension is unique to newcomers, though their mobility accentuates the disparities and contradictions of affective and performative attunement to the city and one's co-residents.

Engaging with various sensorial cues in the city and the bodies of the circulating population, middle-class Senegalese and Spaniards were often socially careful and politically provocative in how they related to the city. Some among them mastered the art of performance, just like Senegalese street and beach vendors. The repertoires of the latter, as well as of Spaniards deprived of their assumed privilege, exemplified why colonial binaries thrive as a rough guide to urban Brazil, each case shedding light on the uneven effects of racial, classed, and gendered hierarchies in a postcolonial city. Maybe exemplary for those most explicitly traversed by the postcolonial condition, Senegalese from all walks of life shared a visceral sense of abusive (post)colonial relations that permeated their historical consciousness and affected their current lives. Yet again, some of the Spaniards, who half-heartedly attuned to historically charged collective local aesthetics, such as racial democracy and mixing, may stand in for those who doubt their judgement and share contradictory sensorial cues. Others among them embodied the risks of (white) privilege fostering arrogant perception, for example, that marked their impulse to keep inherited hierarchies intact. Most often driven by age, and sometimes intersecting with political stance, the younger of my interlocutors admitted to falling prey of the fervour of desire, yet each in distinctive ways; if in one case a Spaniard immersed themselves into the aesthetic sensibilities of nightlife or street carnival, a Senegalese could be afflicted by being attracted towards locals who they also judged as promiscuous. Far from only doing better justice to the local and transnational trajectories of newcomers, in modulations, the continuously evolving sensorial repertoires co-constitute continuities and change in the local society overall. Revealing the intricacies of relating, they clearly remained rooted in the logics of racial, classed, and gendered objectivation while they also rendered the idiosyncrasies of local, as well as transnational, social desirability concrete.

Sensorial repertoires convey the multifaceted experiences and sensibilities that are the actual substance of the creative struggles of arriving or living in cities, which are riddled with complex histories of arrival, privilege, and exclusion and in which overlapping urban atmospheres and aesthetics compete. Apart from conveying a clear sense of the multiple processes at stake, as an analytical lens, sensorial repertoire aptly frames the relevance of both strong wordings and the sensorial densities of the affective processes of inequality, hierarchy, and desire underway (Bille and Simonsen, 2021: 297). Lacking specificity in verbal accounts, insecure interjections, as well as gestures and smiles are further raw indications of how people dwell within the unequal city. An attention to the heterogeneous sensorial repertoires of newcomers better explains some of the seemingly crude and fragmented ways of speaking about a place and its people. It highlights how the relations forged in encounters with urban spaces and its populations are partial as they result from fragmented, ambiguous, and challenging experiences. While acknowledging the specificity of Rio de Janeiro, the global entanglements across three different sites suggest that the shown distortions and tensions

are probably indicative of the urban experiences in most postcolonial cities in which strong and conflicting feelings like desire, fear, and injustice play an equally meaningful role as arrogant aspirations to distinction and fraught attempts to minimize disruptive encounters.

Embodied experience does not easily translate into the hegemonic models of social categorization, which all too easily dominate the perception of the unequal and disruptive social life of a city. Sensorial repertoires more convincingly frame the entangled global and local histories of coloniality, race, class, and gender that pervade contemporary urban life. The sensorial ways of relating in actual encounters with people and spaces significantly mediate these sedimented hierarchies. To conceive of sensorial repertoires in the making does justice to the density and partiality of urban encounters. It renders visible the unstable assemblages of nuanced and fragmented mutual affection and aesthetic impressions that constitute urban bodies and spaces alike.

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Consent

As part of the ethical approval and in line with the ethical guidelines of professional anthropological associations, informed consent was continuously negotiated and maintained throughout the longitudinal research process.

Data availability statement

This article is based in ethnographic fieldwork involving personal data of, at times, vulnerable populations. For this reason, the original research data has not been made publicly available.

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